DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 245 472 EC 162 832

AUTHOR Kaufman, Joanne
TITLE New Vistas in Training for the Human Services. Observations on the Paraprofessional Training Program of United Cerebral Palsy of Maryland, Inc., Montgomery College, and Charles County Community College, 1981-1984.
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (62nd, Washington, DC, April 23-27, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cooperative Programs; *Disabilities; *Paraprofessional Personnel; Program Descriptions
IDENTIFIERS *Paraprofessional Training

ABSTRACT

United Cerebral Palsy of Maryland, Montgomery College, and Charles County Community College provided a federally funded paraprofessional training project on working effectively with handicapped children. The cooperative training program consisted of academic coursework (including two required courses: "Handicapped Citizens: Human Services and Human Relations" and "Families in Crisis") and field experience (a "practicum" involving at least 340 hours of working directly with the handicapped). Instructors, most of whom were involved with community level work, drew from recent and relevant experience with the subject matter in their classroom presentations. Recommendations for the future included a statewide administrative upgrading of the entire field (to attract more men and to confer more status on the field of paraprofessional work with the disabled). Noted among additional observations was that the training program did not generally attract capable students perhaps because of low field status, poor pay, or unpredictable employment. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED245472

NEW VISTAS IN TRAINING FOR THE HUMAN SERVICES

Observations on the Paraprofessional Training Program of United Cerebral Palsy of Maryland, Inc., Montgomery College, and Charles County Community College, 1981-1984.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Thomas Rose
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Joanne Kaufman, Director

Thomas Rose, Coordinator of Training

George R. Kaplan, Consultant

EC162832

Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (62nd, Washington, DC, April 23-27, 1984)

From Need to Program

On October 1, 1981, the federally-funded paraprofessional training project of United Cerebral Palsy of Maryland, Inc., Montgomery College, and Charles County Community College opened for business. Its goal was to provide a 30 credit hour combination of academic training and field experience to 70-90 students, 25-30 in each of three years, that would qualify them to work effectively with handicapped children at a sub-or semi-professional level. Successful participants would receive a certificate attesting to their skills and to the training they had received.

Paraprofessional work with the disabled covers a vast range of functions, many of them taken for granted but all of them technically and emotionally rigorous, even wrenching. The 300-350,000 paraprofessional aides currently in this field draw little public attention, and their training, such as it is and has been, has usually been a forgotten stepchild in the educational family. Yet the work has become infinitely more demanding since the acceleration of deinstitutionalization of a large in-patient population and the passage of landmark federal and state legislation mandating that all handicapped children receive equal educational opportunities.

The field cries out for qualified people, and these political events have served to focus attention on the shortfalls. One that became quickly apparent as the new requirements demanded more of professionals already in the field was that of trained aides able to assume a large percentage of the tasks that credentialled professionals--teachers, therapists, various specialists--had long been performing. Training for careers in working with the disabled --as teacher aides, group home counselors, tutors, sign language interpreters, or any of dozens of other functions--had begun in the late 1970's at Montgomery College after an exhaustive survey of county human services agencies had revealed an overwhelming need for help at the paraprofessional level. Demands on degree holding professionals had increased dramatically, and the aides already in place were willing but often unevenly qualified for the posts they held. And there would be calls for more. Except for a Baltimore area-based training program at Dundalk Community College, which specialized in providing assistants for those working with multiply and severely handicapped children, no other nearby jurisdiction had seriously addressed the problem. State agencies were only beginning to see the implications, in an era of unambiguous laws and court decisions, of continuing to leave disabled young people in the care of well-intentioned but untrained persons. The administration at Charles County Community College was willing, although only imcompletely equipped to learn from Montgomery College, and United Cerebral Palsy of Maryland, with experienced full-time staff and a central location in Annapolis, was ready to provide administrative leadership and coordination of a cooperative training endeavor.

These were the needs, the ingredients, and the tasks. They converged in 1980, and the result was a successful grant application to the U.S. Department of Education for UCP of Maryland to underwrite training programs for special education paraprofessionals (a term used interchangeably with aide, assistant, auxiliary, and similar others) at both colleges from 1981 to 1984. This infusion of federal support, which was eventually to total over $150,000, came with few strings attached but with the certain knowledge of all concerned that an enterprise of this sort would surely encounter snags and glitches. With students scattered all over spacious Montgomery County and in parts of three counties in southern Maryland--the Charles County component expanded into Calvert and St. Mary's Counties--and with central control exercised from Annapolis, management of the project required a sure touch.

The design and operation of the training program were straightforward and uncomplicated. Federal grant money took care of tuition costs for the 80 participants, many of whom were already working as aides for the handicapped. Whatever their age, experience, and/or education (all did have to gain legitimate admission to one of the community colleges), every student took the prescribed 30-credit hour combination of courses (18 hours) and "practicum" (12)--the latter a hands-on experience totalling at least 340 hours of working directly with the handicapped. Two courses--Handicapped Citizens: Human Services and Human Relations and Families in Crisis-- were obligatory, while offerings on deafness, independent living, learning disabilities, and the multihandicapped child entered most individual programs along with relevant electives in such useful, even necessary, areas as healthy living, English composition, and social anthropology.

At the heart of the certificate program was the practicum, for it was this immersion in the lives and problems of the handicapped that was usually the main determinant of a potential paraprofessional's success, failure, or survival. A key feature of the practicum, as of nearly all of the courses, was the interplay among students, faculty, and the assorted guest lecturers and experts--many of them current or potential employers--who were ubiquitous throughout the life of the training project.

There were few crises, and none were serious. The training program worked. How well is difficult to assess. We did what we said we would do nearly all of the time. Roughly 80 student-worker participants saw active duty in the paraprofessional training battle. More than three-fourths of them will have received certificates by the end of the project in mid-1984, and several of those left dangling then will finish up, using other resources, within a year. Of at least on thing we are certain: The program helped to develop a heightened awareness of the paraprofessional training imperative while connecting both colleges even more closely than before to easily overlooked sectors of their communities. We strongly believe, as the following pages indicate, that additional,

equally important and beneficial effects will flow from this project.

Students and Faculty

The tiny corner of American education that prospective aides and their teachers occupy receives little examination by scientists and philosophers. Nor is it a "big payoff" item on the agendas of community or four-year colleges. It is infantry soldiers on the line rather than fighter pilots streaking through the skies. Those involved in this work and in the training for it deal in the here, the now, and the immediately applicable.

This may help to define the individuals who peopled the UCP training project. Whether faculty, staff, or students, degree-holders or novices fresh from high school, participants in this program had or somehow developed an overriding motivation to provide expertise and understanding to handicapped young people. Beyond this, many of the differences were more pronounced than the similarities. Only the ten instructors displayed relatively common qualities. With minor exceptions, the instructors, whether teaching in southern Maryland or Montgomery County, were well-credentialled professionals in their thirties who possessed or were working for advanced degrees. Most were involved in community level work and disinclined to dwell on its larger policy meanings. Although they were effective communicators, few could point to published work. All, however, could draw from recent and relevant experience with the subject matter they were teaching, and an overwhelming majority of the students respected them as teachers and role models. Student evaluations were effusive. These faculty members, adjunct instructors for the most part, helped to erase the students' image of professors as dull, removed from the real world, and indifferent to their students. In other words, they were ideal.

Such clear characterizations were not applicable in defining the student participants. Generalizations can thus be misleading. Several characteristics nevertheless surfaced early in the project's life. Clearly, the students from Charles, Calvert, and St. Mary's counties were more typical of the field than were their peers as a group in Montgomery County, a prosperous suburban jurisdiction bordering the District of Columbia. Few of the southern Maryland contingent had ever had college-level academic courses, and, in many cases, the quality of their secondary education was suspect. Nearly all were supporting themselves, and a majority had families to feed and house as well. Several were single parents. These were working people sandwiching their classroom training into the nearly non-existent free time that job and family may have left them. They were also, by and large, strong, well-adjusted individuals of solid moral character with virtually all of the human qualities that paraprofessional work in the tougher human services demands. If they had any problems, they were

usually economic. Job opportunities for anyone, especially persons without finite skills, are underwhelming in southern Maryland. The certificate could help open doors and improve opportunities.

The Montgomery College segment embraced more diversity. Drawn from a county population of nearly 600,000 as well as from neighboring areas, the MC group included middle-aged middle class women who hadn't worked at paying jobs or gone to school for 20-plus years, recent high school graduates attending the College full-time, part-time workers of all ages, veterans of the volunteer wars, and a sprinkling of minority group representatives and handicapped citizens. For many of them the content of the Handicapped Assistance Certificate Program was something new; for nearly all of the Charles-Calvert-St. Mary's people, it was a validation and amplification of material and techniques they were already employing. Two-thirds of the MC students planned to complete the associate-level degree and, in some cases, graduate from a four-year college, preferably in special education or a related field. Only a small minority of the southern Marylanders nursed such ambitions.

Yet all 80-odd students, whether 17-year-old freshmen or 65-year-old activist, shared certain qualities. Academic work at any level did not come easily to many, and, as one instructor commented: "Students are students. Whoever they are, they won't do more than they have to, and more often than not, they'll try to con the teacher." The pull of the field was strong, but it would lessen for most unless their work received substantially more reward and recognition. Without exception, though, they respected the training, their instructors, and the work they were doing or preparing to do. By taking this training and performing this work, nearly all agreed, they were becoming more capable, more fulfilled people.

The Federal Response

Having prepared a successful grant application, we entered our "operational" phase confident that we knew our business. We were, and are, experienced trainers with good qualifications for meeting the special demands of a difficult field. We knew, and know, our "market", especially the troubled world of Maryland's handicapped children. Our data on feasibiltiy and community attitudes were current, technically accurate, and informed by a sharp sensitivity to the mores and economies of the communities our students would serve. We believed that only an unanticipated administrative or financial crisis could seriously disrupt the project's progress.

In a direct application of Murphy's Law, one of each hit us just as the curtain was to rise on our three-year undertaking. A cost-conscious new Administration with heavy Congressional support appeared bent on reducing or delaying expenditures for social programs, and it was not until three months after its scheduled July 1981 launching that the project opened for business--with a budget only half of the amount that the Office of Special Education of the U.S. Department of Education had committed itself to providing. Although much of the cut was eventually restored, finan-

cial projections for the two years to follow were also lowered from levels our accepted proposal had suggested. In its early stages, then, this training program was to suffer from what the educationists used to call "unplanned interventions."

In its nearly three-year lifetime, the Maryland project found the federal role to be both blessing and curse-- blessing for the $150,000 that gave the enterprise financial stability, curse for the unpredictability of that support (no single individual in nearby Washington was conversant with the project throughout its life) and a lack of informed interest. Monitoring was scarce--only one professional visit from representatives of the Department of Education which was but 35 miles away--but that did not disturb us because we saw little need for outside guidance. What was mildly annoying was that Washington made no effort to place us in contact with other groups of our type. With the demise of the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Special Education and its network of trainers, we found ourselves working in vacuo. Despite our self-confidence, it would have been reassuring to be able to share wisdom, avoid repeating possible costly errors, and integrate the successful practices of similar projects.

In larger terms, however, we have no cause for complaint. Once the delay in launching the project was behind us, the money came on schedule. We usually got straight answers to administrative questions we posed to the federal office. The monitoring we did get was helpful and good-spirited. And, earning our gratitude, the federal office dropped no major surprises, dictated no changes in substantive direction, and levied no sudden demands. We realize how fortunate we were.

Some Reflections and Messages

Training paraprofessionals to serve disabled children is like promoting good nutrition or consumer awareness: widely perceived as virtuous and necessary but equally widely underappreciated and therefore too frequently ignored. It is different from most other educational endeavors in that the subject matter--physically handling severely handicapped people, mastering techniques for instructing disturbed children, dealing with basic human needs, to take several obvious examples--often transcends technical processes and factual knowledge. It delves straight into the human being and his or her values, psyches, and problems. It is one thing for a physically and emotionally "normal" child to hit rough spots in learning to read or write. Patience and long-validated remedial techniques usually do the trick. For a multiply handicapped adolescent, the same experience, or a far different, even more fundamental one, can be psychologically devastating. Yet dealing with a crisis of this sort is supposedly well within the scope of many paraprofessionals, a factor that doesn't reduce its enormous importance. It is difficult to cite another field in which a non-professional's responsibilities strike so close to the course of another person's life .

The point cannot be overemphasized. Productive service with handicapped persons can be emotionally and physically taxing. It can also provide a glimpse of a different kind of potential--that of

paraprofessional aides or helpers whose involvement often strengthens their own character and makes them fuller, better integrated people. Whatever their pre-professional backgrounds, those who stick to this work almost inevitably become more solid citizens than they were. As parents and spouses, they are customarily understanding yet firm in their relationships. They have greater tolerance than most of us for ambiguity and unpredictability in human behavior. If young, they mature well; if older, they come to realize that maturation occurs at all ages and in different unplanned ways. They respect both themselves and the individuals they serve. They are, in short, very good people--better, perhaps, than most of them think.

Most of this applies to women, mainly because our project, like all others of its type we have heard about, attracted few males. In our case, the female-male participant ratio was roughly five to one. The reasons for the imbalance are both obvious and discouraging. It is nearly impossible to support a family on the earnings of a teacher's aide or group home worker. There is only scant hope of advancement or security, a particularly damaging factor in a society that prizes both upward mobility and personal economic stability. Women now move readily into once-exclusively "men's" work domains, but the reverse process is much slower and, to many men, immeasurably less attractive. The aura of "machismo", which many men still consider to be a fundamental life value, is absent when they perform traditionally "women's" tasks. Pumping gas or grilling hamburgers has far more zing and gusto for many males, and the money is as good or better. For those men who do have the urge to serve good causes while earning a decent living, there are more lucrative and satisfying possibilities in the medical, law enforcement, and environmental fields, to name a few.

Were we to pass this way again--that is, to seek major outside funding for a cooperative training effort for aides--we would strongly urge a statewide administrative upgrading of the entire field, both to attract more men and to confer as much long-needed status as possible on this neglected but vital training and work. This recommendation cuts two possibly incompatible ways. Credentialling, licensing, and certification do, indeed, tend to legitimatize endeavors that must have more officially recognized esteem in order to function most effectively, and they specify minimal qualifications and competencies. Were a state body to assume charge and do its job, the field would gradually acquire a place in the hierarchy of educational and social services. On the other hand, tough technical and academic requirements would doubtless work to exclude otherwise excellent prospects who are neither students or test-takers. Too, the virtues of state certification where it now occurs--Texas, Kansas, Louisiana, as the outstanding examples-- are often vitiated by the exceptionally low status the special education paraprofessionals eventually achieve in the pecking order. For the time being, the carefully constructed model of Montgomery College's Handicapped Assistance Certificate Program, which has guided the UCP project throughout its lifetime, is adequate for Maryland even though it is tailored to the realities of Montgomery County. The

aides demonstrate an excellent combination of academic and real world experience, and employers are pleased to have persons of known background and competence. Beyond HACP, however, is a world of salary scales, professional standards, statewide-recognized credentials, career opportunities, and incentives that require early attention.

The project generates some additional observations;

1. For whatever reason--low status of the field, poor pay, unpredictable employment, or others--this training program did not generally attract capable students. Some, of course, were outstanding, and most met the requirements. But these exceptions cannot allow us to wish away the inescapable fact that far too many, especially in southern Maryland, really required remedial work to enable them to learn in a post-secondary educational setting. This was not within the scope of a project with a bulging agenda and no resources for compensatory training. It created obvious problems.

2. We wanted to enroll persons with handicaps. They would have enriched the project while improving their own prospects. It didn't happen. A few participated and profited from their experience, but the field does not yet appear ready to draw people with disabilities. Experience elsewhere suggests a similar lack of success, but this should not defeat efforts to involve handicapped adults. Those who have entered this work bring extra human dimensions that multiply the value of their services, and nearly all provide role models worthy of emulation.

3. The economic and personal characteristics of the participants imparted an inservice rather than preservice quality to the project. Most of the enrollees, especially in southern Maryland, were workers first and students second--or third. And the work they were doing was the work for which they were being trained. It was neither easy nor sensible, therefore, for instructors to start from ground zero with most students. Others, however, were inexperienced recent high school graduates for whom the concepts and material were freshly minted wisdom . We walked a delicate path.

4. To reemphasize an earlier comment, the instructors and instruction were excellent. There is no shortage of top-flight, credentialled professionals who can do demanding therapeutic, technical, or managerial work all day and teach effectively at night. The ten we employed were the cream of an excellent crop in both geographical sectors of the project. Copious evaluations by students --each student assessed each course, and our file drawers are overflowing--were overwhelmingly favorable. Less flattering, though, were some comments about course texts. There is far too little community college-level material in this field. Too, as we observed earlier, the students were generally not adept book learners.

5. Whatever the fate of the training of special education paraprofessionals in southern Maryland (the program at Montgomery College is a permanent, fully integrated part of the curriculum), the project created a group and community feeling among those in this vital work in Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary's counties. A bond developed among the students. Informal networks formed. Some courses will almost certainly continue. The leadership of Charles County Community College saw their institution involved in an effort that will merit the most serious attention as a permanent offering there.

Beyond these observations, the UCP training effort validated an additional central proposition: that geographically scattered colleges, schools, public service facilities, private organizations, and individual experts--in other words, a seemingly disparate and uneven collection of entities--can collaborate effectively to achieve a common purpose. As in the case of training paraprofessionals for the human services, the effort need not be costly. But there are certain requisites. There must be either outside starter-type financial help or small levies on participating groups, one or two committed professionals with a larger view, a shared capacity for administrative flexibility (which was not always evident in our project), and a willingness to avoid reinventing the wheel. A young program existed at Montgomery College. It was just about ready for export. Customers appeared. The deal was made, and the parties honored their obligations. It benefitted all who participated.